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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: REGIME TIGHTENING ELECTORAL CODE ON EVE OF LOCAL  
ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The Belarusian Parliament will review a bill of 60 amendments to the Electoral Code in early October, which if passed, could have a noticeable impact on the process leading up to municipal elections in January 2007. Most of the changes will not be publicized until after signed into law by Lukashenko. Others, such as limitations on election campaign rallies to meet with voters, restrictions on election observation, and elimination of second-round voting in local elections, are being actively discussed in the press and among the opposition. While the unified opposition continues its efforts to contest the local elections, the proposed changes to the Electoral Code will mainly serve to simplify the authorities, falsification tactics and further exclude the opposition and civil society groups from the election process. End summary.

2. (C) On October 2, the Belarusian Parliament will officially review a bill of 60 amendments to the Electoral Code ahead of the local council elections. Human rights defender Vladimir Labkovich told Poloff September 21 that the Parliament was encouraged to approve the amendments immediately, likely by October 5, so that President Lukashenko would be able to sign them into law before announcing the official date for local elections that are tentatively planned for January 14. Although details of the amendments remain a mystery and are not published on the government's legal portal or in the state media, the independent press has been successful in identifying a few amendments under review.

Permit To Campaign

3. (SBU) The most controversial change in the Electoral Code is the amendment to restrict candidates' ability to meet with voters. According to the amendment, candidates who wish to hold meetings outdoors must follow Belarusian law by applying to the local authorities for permission 15 days in advance.

4. (C) Belarusian National Front deputy and head of the United Democratic Force, Secretariat Viktor Ivashkevich claimed to Pol/Econ Chief September 15 that the requirement would reduce local council candidates, time frame for conducting an effective campaign. The Electoral Code allows candidates to begin campaigning only one month before

Election Day, theoretically on December 14. Indoor venues will refuse their facilities to opposition candidates, giving them no other choice than to meet outside with voters. The soonest permission will be granted is December 29, the beginning of the holiday season and only two weeks before Election Day.

#### Observer Status Changed

15. (C) Another controversial amendment requires election observers, including those on election committees, to be members of political parties, civil society organizations, or trade unions/labor collectives rather than non-affiliated representatives nominated by such organizations. Labkovich explained that should this take effect, organizations like the registered NGO Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) or the unregistered NGO Vyasna could not hire independent citizens as election observers, limiting these organizations' ability to monitor elections. (Note: The U.S. and German Embassies will provide financial support for BHC's local election observation efforts, and the organization is already developing alternative plans for recruiting short-term election observers. End note.)

16. (C) According to Labkovich, the amendment would exclude political parties from almost the entire election process. Regional parties without registration will not be considered a party and therefore unable to nominate members to sit on election commissions. Registered political parties with few members would not be able to nominate non-members to help monitor all election committees and polling stations. Labkovich noted that the only organizations with registered legal structures and substantial membership at all levels would be the pro-government trade unions and youth organizations, organizations that the head of the Central

Election Committee (CEC) Lidiya Yermoshina & predicted8 would assume the brunt of election observation.

17. (C) Labkovich fears that the bill includes an amendment preventing citizens from nominating independent local election observers. According to Labkovich, should this happen, the GOB would have succeeded in stripping citizens of practically all their basic voting rights.

#### No Second Round Voting

18. (C) One amendment to the Electoral Code eliminates the second round of voting for local council elections. According to current legislation, candidates must receive over half of the total votes in order to win a council seat. If not, then the two candidates with the most votes compete in a second voting round to determine the winner. The new amendment determines the winner to be the one with the most votes in the first round. CEC Head Yermoshina and her deputy Nikolai Lozovik have repeatedly told reporters that the purpose of the amendment is to cut the cost of local elections and maintained that second-round voting would be preserved in presidential and parliamentary elections. Labkovich and Ivashkevich viewed the proposed amendment as another mechanism to simplify and reduce the cost of falsifications.

19. (C) Other proposed amendments include:

-- Eliminating the clause "one and the same person could be a president not more than two terms" from the law on the president of Belarus, thereby fully & legalizing8 Lukashenko's third term.

-- Allowing the state media to cite polling data up to five days before elections, not ten days as presently allowed. Labkovich explained that this amendment & legally8 allows the authorities to conduct its propaganda campaign closer to Election Day.

Comment

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¶10. (C) The proposed amendments will only exacerbate the weaknesses the OSCE identified in Belarus, Electoral Code. A few members of the National Assembly have publicly expressed their concerns with the severity of the proposed election code changes, but the rubberstamp &parliament8 will inevitably pass the amendments with little or no change.

Clearly, the amendments will further consolidate the regime,s control over all aspects of the election process.  
Stewart